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Reading King Hu: A Note on His Literary Style

Aside from being a celebrated filmmaker, King Hu was also known to be a productive writer-essayist in his time. From his early days at Shaw Brothers,¹ to the final “quiet” years in Southern California, he wrote more than one hundred short articles,² authored a book on Lao She, and began writing a memoir that remains unfinished. Having regularly published in magazines and newspaper columns, King Hu was able to keep in touch with his fans and admirers through the course of his career. Covering a wide range of topics, he articulated, explained and discoursed effortlessly through his uniquely expressive compositions; as if in addition to his genius as a filmmaker, writing was also another remarkable talent that came naturally to him.

Originally written on formal manuscript sheets³ in traditional Chinese characters,⁴ King Hu’s elegant compositions exhibit an innate fluency with a grounding in the Chinese classics. While such impressive literary aptitude is evidence of his affluent upbringing, much of it can also be attributed to his ceaseless pursuit of knowledge throughout his life almost as an auto-didact. After all, King Hu had been far away from home on his own since the young age of eighteen. He was not able to finish high school, and never received the college education that he once desired.⁵

Likely influenced by the urban colloquialism he probably picked up while living in Hong Kong and Taiwan, King Hu’s writing style encompasses a distinctive vernacular flair, artfully blended into a casual yet classical literary structure. Combining the old Beijinger inside him with a refreshing westernized energy, his diction is sharp, dynamic and yet well balanced. While his phrases were meticulously crafted, King Hu did not shy away from being straightforward. At times he would allow his thoughts to flow directly onto the page, without reserve, as if in spoken form: relaxed, witty and unmediated. His observations engage readers effortlessly, as if he were talking directly to an old acquaintance. And every now and then, he would mindfully adapt complex literary techniques from the Chinese traditional classics, carefully composing with unmatched vigor, richness and symmetry all the while maintaining a succinct eloquence that never came across as overly rhetorical or insincere.

Whether imparting his technical knowledge, sharing his research, or delving into observations of life, King

Hu managed to thoughtfully balance witticism and formality into a distinctive style of his own. Embedded into his writings is a sense of humility, for example describing his scope of knowledge as “this bellyful of stale sesame seeds and putrid grain,”⁶ or muttering that he “was not talented, did not study very much, and lacked basic training.”⁷ Whether he was motivated to pick up his pen “just to earn a royalty,”⁸ or to simply “fulfill a vainglorious promise,”⁹ it is clear that King Hu took his writing very seriously – with the same ardor and drive that he carried throughout the extensive historical research for his films. “My writing might be messy, but my facts are not made up,”¹⁰ he declared.

Consistent with his disciplined and rational personality, King Hu was reserved when it came to emotional expression. As a self-described “stateless refugee,”¹¹ King Hu lived his entire adult life in a perpetual exile from homeland China. His introspective prose sometimes reflects a heartfelt sense of nostalgia and solitude, yearning for a profound sense of belonging. Unuttered sentiments would often be metaphorically embedded, for instance, in his description of a particular hometown food flavor that he hadn’t tasted since childhood; or in a meditative confession of his inability to retain a beloved book collection.¹² Such shielded emotions resonate deeply and at times one wishes that he might have been more self-indulgent in these intimate reflections. In a rare instance, King Hu did quietly divulge his romantic affections and made a subtle declaration of appreciation for the committed companionship he had at the time: he interrupted his thoughts on the excessive travels he made for the Lao She book research by simply stating that “the biggest harvest I reaped in Cambridge was meeting (my wife) Chung Ling.”¹³

Unfortunately, reading King Hu in English will always be a very different experience from reading him directly in Chinese. Particular quotes, idioms, slang, dialects and expressions with special meanings only known to people from certain regions of China do not convey the same impressions in translation. There are so many subtle linguistic and cultural nuances that cannot be translated accurately without making stylistic compromises. Despite such limitations, our ultimate objective has always been to faithfully reproduce his words in the closest natural equivalent in terms of meaning and spirit. We have taken much care with the translations for this first ever publication of King Hu’s writings in English and have been proud to work on this unprecedented volume which honors his legacy that continues to inspire.

¹ *Conditioned Reflex and Filmic Language* was published in 1957.

² The majority of these articles, such as *The Choreography of My Action Films: Illusion and Reality*, were published between 1995-1997.

³ 稿紙 (gaozhi), formal writing paper printed with light colored squares designed to accommodate a certain number of Chinese characters or punctuation marks per sheet. Commonly used by professional writers prior to the advent of computer word processing.

⁴ Traditional Chinese characters are currently used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and overseas Chinese communities. Simplified Chinese was promoted in mainland China in the 1950s as part of the simplification movement, which aimed to enforce structural simplification of character forms as well as substantial reduction in the total number of standardize Chinese characters.

⁵ Before leaving Beijing for Hong Kong, Hu had planned to attend a

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college in Colorado, U. S. A. (Hu, *A Touch of King Hu*, 1998, pp. 28-29).

⁶ *A Fool Narrates a Dream* (1993).

⁷ *Historical Research and Period Costume Films* (1971).

⁸ *A Fool Narrates a Dream* (1993).

⁹ *A Question That Is Not a Question* (1977).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "I am a refugee without a nationality." (Hu, *A Touch of King Hu*, 1998, pp. 201-202).

¹² *A Burden of Books* (1984).

¹³ *Ibid.*